

ADDENDUM

Shelter/Tent Campers Summary

Focus Groups with
Recent Users and Lapsed/Non-Users
of Texas State Parks
Contract #177796

August 2007

Attracting Texas Residents to Texas State Parks

Conducted for:

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Austin, Texas

Conducted by:



Shelter/Tent Camper (Recent Users) Target

Respondent Profile

A focus group of shelter/tent campers was conducted July 25, 2007 in Dallas:

- Ages 25-62
- Camped in a shelter or tent in past 12 months at any park or campground
- Most had also camped at a Texas state park in the past year (no requirement)
- Most had high levels of interest in nature related outdoor activities
- One Hispanic, one African-American, 8 Caucasian
- Most had children at home and a few had grandchildren
- 6 men and 4 women

Tent/Shelter Camping: Perceptions, Usage/Habits and Decision Factors

Perceptions

- Top-of-mind images when thinking of overnight stays in tents or shelters included stress-release/get away, fun and games with family, good food and cooking outdoors, fire rings and the enjoyment of nature.

Visuals/photos of their tent/shelter camping experiences reflected the diverse experiences and were described as: serene, adventure, fun, family/friend bonding, enjoying the beauty of nature/back to nature, activities such as hiking and water sports, and good food.

- Favorite camping places typically had water features such as lakes for fishing, swimming, canoeing or paddle boating for the kids. A few preferred the mountains and vistas of Palo Duro Canyon, Colorado or New Mexico.

Usage and Habits

- Most stay overnight in both tents and shelters. Shelters tend to be preferred in the spring when it may be more likely to rain.

Two prefer cabins (and wives prefers cabins), but stay in shelters or tents as well.

- Three men were more frequent tent/shelter campers, with over 10 nights in the past year. One was retired, one was involved in his son's scouting, and one was an avid backpacker/hiker.

- When staying in tents or shelters, respondents tend to prefer:
 - Weekends rather than weekdays due to work schedule, although some will try to leave on Thursday to get a preferred site/park
 - Spring and Fall are their favorite times of year due the cooler weather
 - Most tend to go with family or friends

Decision Process

- Key factors in the decision process as to where to go camping with a tent or shelter included (in order of importance):
 - Distance (considering amount of time and cost of gas)
 - Water (lakes, rivers)
 - Facilities (electricity, water, showers, working bathrooms)
 - Trails (hiking, biking)
 - Scenery (trees)
 - Shelters or tent sites available/availability
 - Good website so can see it before arriving
 - Proximity to other attractions/stores
 - Amenities/rentals

Other considerations mentioned, but not one of the most important include nice/level tent pad (like Tyler and Eisenhower), large size of campsite areas (not crowded), grills available.

A nice tent pad. A well managed, well groomed. Like at Tyler State Park or Eisenhower. If you're going to put a tent on it, it needs level and square and flat and sand and something you can drive a tent peg into."

- For a week trip, the distance becomes much less important, while water features, facilities (electricity, water, showers, bathrooms) and trails increase in importance.

About half would not camp in a tent or shelter for a week, saying that the weather was too hot (they go with children during the summer months) or they would get a hotel.

- The most frequently mentioned information source when considering shelter camping was the internet/websites, searching the name of the specific park or lake they want to go to. Websites/state park websites (Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas) are used because of the visuals (want to see what the area and cabins look like) and the detailed information that is available.

Other sources that have been important include:

- Word of mouth
 - GORP
 - *Texas Parks and Wildlife* magazine (a few used to receive it with their annual membership)
 - Pamphlets available when visiting a state park, although “*you have to go there to get them*”.
- They don’t like surprises when they arrive (“*I don’t want to get the blame [from my family] when nobody has fun.*”)

Texas State Parks

Awareness and Usage

- Awareness of Texas state parks was strong among this group of shelter and tent campers.

Most had stayed in a Texas state park in the past year.

- Some confusion existed about which lakes and campsites were state parks and which were not. Some confused private or other public lakes and camping sites as being Texas state parks.
- Over half would consider a Texas state park if looking for a shelter campsite.

Those that would not are more likely to think of Oklahoma and Arkansas state parks or look for the specific lake they want to go to – typically not a state park.

“I keep going back. I keep doing it so I must like it. There are some places that I don’t go to because I’ve been to them once but I didn’t enjoy it because it was a bad tent pad, it was too hot, wasn’t close to the water. For the most part, I really enjoy Texas state parks. I don’t really consider anyplace else.”

- Almost half have an annual pass, so they are committed to Texas state parks (“*we have already made the investment*”)
- Some use state parks other than for camping, such as:
 - Scouting activities
 - Mountain biking
 - Birthday parties
 - Dutch oven cook-off
 - Marathon/iron man race

- Most were uncertain of the number of state parks within 60 miles of Dallas, and were surprised that 5 were within 60 miles. This information would increase their likelihood to visit a state park for a day trip (*“that’s doable”*).

Image of Texas State Parks

- Top-of-mind thoughts of Texas state parks brought to mind experiences at specific parks and the appeal or problems with each.

Tyler State Park came to mind because of the water features with easy access to the lake, trees to keep it cool, area for kids to swim, playground.

In addition to specific parks, thoughts of fun/family times and exploring came to mind.

- Most are satisfied with Texas state parks for tent/shelter camping, a few because of very positive experiences (e.g., Tyler and Mineral Wells) and others because of lower expectations (*“I go into camping with an open mind”*) and no “major” complaints.

“I think the reason Tyler State Park pops up with everybody is because Eisenhower is so high up and it’s not close to the water. Tyler has the trees, it has a great area for the kids to swim, it has a playground for the little kids, it has everything around the lake and there’s trees there too, to cool it down. Cooper State Park doesn’t have as many trees around the shelters yet. It’s not as easy access to the lake. The access to the lake is so convenient everywhere around Tyler State Park.”

“Mineral Wells has shelters right on the lake. We even drove up and my wife can basically walk out the door, throw a line into the water, and have a cup of coffee in the other hand. She’s lost poles in that lake. Fish just pull them off.”

There are some places that I don’t go to because I’ve been to them once but I didn’t enjoy it because it was a bad tent pad, it was too hot, wasn’t close to the water. But 9, for the most part, I really enjoy Texas state parks. I don’t really consider anyplace else. One other thing nobody mentioned is security.”

“I’m generally satisfied for the parks we’ve been to. I think for the size and wealth of Texas there should be more parks and the parks should be bigger. We can do better. I know they’re working on it, over the next 10 to 20 years. We can do better.”

Shelter/tent campers do not seem to have high expectations of the facilities themselves (*“you know what you’re getting”*) – they expect a rustic experience and are more there for the nature and activities available in the setting.

- The primary appeals of staying in tents/shelters at Texas state parks were varied, and included:
 - Security/feel safe (ranger visible and enforces quiet)
 - Good campsites (near water, level)
 - Low cost/affordable (4 have an annual pass)
- Complaints about Texas state parks tended to focus on the popularity of the parks and reservations/lack of availability:
 - Overcrowded
 - Lack of availability
 - Can't reserve specific campsites
 - Difficult getting a campsite at popular times (e.g., Spring Break)
 - Fire rings are never clean

"My biggest complaint about these parks is that they never clean the fire rings. They're full of debris from previous campers. I'm always shoveling and putting in to a plastic bag all the chars and broken bottles. They don't maintain those."

Increasing Visits to Texas State Parks

- Tent/shelter campers tend to be very positive about camping and enjoying state parks, and were very responsive to requests for ideas to increase usage of the state parks.

Tent/shelter campers suggested their usage of state parks among this group could be increased primarily by:

- Adding additional camping sites, yurts and cabins
- Better maintained sites
- Increasing communications to raise awareness of facilities and activities, specifically about locations of state parks
- Communicating activities and offering better visuals on the website; email updates

"Bring themselves to my attention so I don't push camping to the back of my mind."

"A lot of times we get too busy with everyday life that we don't think about fun until it's too late. If I knew something was going on in two weeks, we'd take the time to take the kids to do something fun."

"I know, but I don't necessarily think about going there, but if something came in an email it might get my attention."

"I look up photography events, stargazing events, and things like that at Palo Duro. I went sometime during a light snowfall. If you look at the events section they say what events are coming up."

"How increase usage? "What you're talking about is the events. My kids love those. Where they talk about the animals in this locale or dinosaurs. It's dark and they have the campfire."

"I say a lot more information. Obviously in here likes to go but not everybody has a good grasp of where the state parks were at. I guess more information about them pushed out to us."

"That's what I put. Bring themselves more to my attention either by mail or email. Solicit me more because it's not as easy to push camping into the back of my mind."

"Being that photography is my passion, I think that the Texas state parks should have pictures of things of the park. Like a photo gallery of each park."

Other suggestions were to improve the reservation process, including email alerts of openings/cancellations and expanding the park system with more parks and expanding existing parks.

"I would probably go last minute if they would send me an email of the cabins that were available last minute versus me having to call every hour to see if a cancellation occurred. I would run of there for one night. Get an alert. Got a cabin opening tomorrow night at Cooper State Park. I'd go."

- Suggestions for changes or offerings at Texas state parks to increase tent/shelter camping tended to be very specific and included:
 - Better maintained/cleaner (area picked up, more trash cans)
 - More space between tent pads/campsites – more secluded feeling
 - Restrooms close by with sufficient lighting at night (women and children)
 - Hot water in the showers (consistently hot)
 - Air conditioning (like Bob Sandlin) or ceiling fans (like McKinney Falls)
 - Better/longer hiking trails
 - Convenience store/bait shop (like Possum Kingdom)
 - Wood for campfires
 - More pet friendly/perhaps a dog park or dog beach
 - Control mosquitoes, spiders, snakes (realizing that this is not possible)

"Not too long ago we rented some cabins not at the state park but we drove over to Possum Kingdom State Park, first thing I did I had my husband stop so I could look at the bathrooms. I turned on the water in the shower to see if hot water would come out because sometimes it doesn't turn on a Tyler State Park. I was surprised. It didn't look great on the outside but it was clean n the inside and you turn that water on and it was hot instantly."

"Particularly as a woman, you get up in the middle of the night, you're taking your child to the bathroom. It's dark, all you've got is a flashlight and you walk up and the bathroom is pitch black and you think, 'Am I going to open this door and some

stranger is going to be here waiting on me? Or some animal. Am I going to sit on the toilet and sit on a tarantula? Bathroom lighting is big time."

"Tyler State Park definitely needs a campground store with bait. The closest bait store is like, about 15 miles away."

"One thing I wish Texas did more of is have facilities for backpacking. The trails at most parks in Texas are like a mile and a half, two mile, they're relatively short which really doesn't lend itself to putting on your backpack and going out a couple of days."

"Possum Kingdom store is one of the best stocked I've ever seen. From the outside, it doesn't look like it. It is full of stuff. Where Tyler State Park is more commercial. It's all about the t-shirts and the books and the recipe books. It doesn't have a whole lot of s'mores, marshmallows and chocolate bars. You have to go outside. They don't have any of the basics."

- Suggestions to increase visits other than for shelter camping included:
 - Being proactive in communications about upcoming events ("we want to know and it's hard to find"), such as a monthly calendar of events mailed or emailed
 - Events for children
 - Day activities
 - Races/5 K's
 - Promote to groups/clubs, such as kayaking
- Email updates appear to be the best source to stay informed about Texas state parks, with half wanting to sign up for the service. They would like to know about special events or activities (fireworks, concerts, photography or star gazing).

"Be more proactive in telling people about their events instead of just having to go hunting to find it. People here are interested, if you want to sign up for an email group, so instead of us going out to find the information they're pushing it towards us."

Availability of the pamphlets (previously described by one respondent) also generated interest as an effective means of being informed and would encourage them to try other parks. Suggestions were made to receive them by mail or have a link on the website to download them or request a mailing.

"I love to camp but I go where I know. If I had that at my disposal I'd try a place I've never been before."

- Information that would be helpful in making their decision includes:
 - Pictures/visuals of the campsites and park
 - A map of campsites to aid selection
 - List of amenities in the area (like hotels, stores)
 - Ability to reserve the desired spot/campsite

- Articles like TPW magazine – best atmosphere, best trees, etc.
- Events and activities being offered

“It’s just like you are looking at a hotel room. You want pictures of what you’re getting yourself into and the amenities that are provided at that particular park.”

Reactions to Concepts

Note: Respondents were made aware that there are a number of state parks within 60 miles, which may have contributed to higher interest.

Yurts

- Interest in Yurts was moderately strong among tent/shelter visitors with half interested at a price of about \$20-25. The addition of air conditioning resulted in unanimous strong interest and the perceived value increased to \$35-\$40 per night.

Group Facilities

- Interest in renting a group facility was fairly limited, with a few indicating strong interest. Expected rental fees were typically \$100-\$150 a day, those uninterested expected \$75/day. Those interested in a group facility thought of using it for scouting, family reunions, birthday parties, and possibly company team meetings.

Outdoors Workshops

- Participating in outdoor workshops received little interest because they felt they already knew how to do these things. Those expressing interest thought it would be good for their children, and might want to have their children do this in conjunction with a camping trip so adults could have “a little downtime.” Expected fees were \$10-\$15.

To make the workshop more appealing, suggestions were made to offer other training, such as: fishing, survival skills, orienteering, and scouting skills such as making tents.

Summer Camps

- Although most had children at home, few were interested in a weeklong day camp. Offering transportation did not increase interest overall – some went up and some down. Although transportation offers convenience, trust was an issue and many are concerned with the child’s safety. Expected fees were \$100 to \$150 a week.

Some felt an overnight camp would be more attractive. Another suggestion was to offer this in conjunction with a family camping experience at a state park so the kids would busy during the day and the parents could have time to themselves.